On Chinese Culture Curriculum planning¹

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The importance of cultural elements in foreign language teaching has been widely accepted in recent years. This applies particularly to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) to non-native Chinese speakers at tertiary level in mainland China. However, there is no commonly accepted blueprint that defines the parts of Chinese culture that ought to be taught.

This study suggests that (a) a Chinese Culture Curriculum (Wenhua Da Gang) is needed in order to solve the ambiguities existing in current teaching and to respond to the rising demands from the Chinese government and students and (b) the setting up the objectives of a Chinese Culture Curriculum should be done prior to the selection of content.

This study attempts to raise the awareness of need for planning a Chinese Culture Curriculum as the blueprint to guide the practice of teaching. The goal of the study is to raise questions rather than to find answers.

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), Chinese culture curriculum (*Wenhua Da Gang*), objectives, social culture, knowledge culture

BACKGROUND

The phrase 'teaching Chinese as a foreign language' (TCFL) applies to the teaching of non-native Chinese speakers, excluding those of Chinese origin, who are learning Chinese in mainland China. This study examines the situation in mainland China both generally and also in the international setting in order to achieve a complete understanding and scope of language learning.

The teaching of Chinese culture in TCFL was initiated in the 1950s, almost at the same time the TCFL started. Teaching culture at that time was more for political propaganda than for increasing language competency. Chinese cultural subjects were not widely established in the university until the 1980s. In practice, the teaching of Chinese culture and the teaching of Chinese language have been taught in parallel in most tertiary institutions. The Chinese government published two language curricula to regulate the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. However, in the teaching of Chinese culture, there has been no blueprint that could be used to guide the teaching practice. This study intends to explore this undeveloped area and to provide a theoretical foundation for the planning of a Chinese Culture Curriculum.

WHAT IS A CHINESE CULTURE CURRICULUM

A curriculum is expected to address the following issues: the objectives of teaching, the content to be taught, teaching methods and evaluation (Brady, 1995; Kelly, 2004; Lawton, 1975; Taba, 1962;

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Tanner and Tanner, 1980; Tyler, 1949; Walker, 1990; Wheeler, 1967; Zais, 1976). Accordingly a Chinese Culture Curriculum should address the following issues: (a) why should Chinese culture be taught, (b) which aspects of Chinese culture should be taught, (c) how should they be taught and (d) whether or not the goals have been achieved. However, given the complex characteristics of culture, and the bilingual and bicultural background of TCFL students, the planning of a Chinese Culture Curriculum may be idiosyncratic and challenging.

This study is based upon two assumptions. The first is that the Chinese Culture Curriculum does not belong to the family of language curricula and the second is that it is linked to language elements. It is a blueprint planned for teaching Chinese culture to foreigners who are learning Chinese on the mainland of China. Four concerns are raised accordingly:

- (a) The Chinese Culture Curriculum is for the purpose of foreign language education. This highlights the point that it is expected to serve the needs of improving students' cross-cultural language competency, so that students' needs are prioritised. The foreign students have different cultural backgrounds to Chinese students. Thus their ethnographical features, predominant values and interests need to be considered. The object of the Culture Curriculum is Chinese culture, which is not an single discipline like physics, history or geography, but is complex, comprehensive, value-orientated and dynamic in its nature. Hence the questions of who decides which cultural elements are selected, who owns the Culture Curriculum, turn out to be even more remarkable in the planning of the Culture Curriculum than in general education.
- (b) The context upon which the Culture Curriculum is based also needs to be considered. TCFL as one part of China's education is not free from the influences that may overshadow China's education as a whole, such as the educational philosophy, socioeconomic conditions, and the moral and political traditions. Therefore, the Culture Curriculum may not only be influenced by students' needs to improve language competency, but may also be shaped by the context in which the foreign language is taught.
- (c) Another assumption arises in response to the debate related to the aims of teaching culture in TCFL (Lu, 1990). Two questions need to be considered: Has culture been taught to promote and disseminate China's cultural traditions (ii) Does the culture improve students' language competency? This paper adopts the neutral stand that teaching Chinese culture in TCFL serves two purposes: (i) to disseminate Chinese culture and (ii) to improve students' intercultural communication competency. A blueprint is presented that should serve the needs of language education without compromising the needs of the Chinese government's promotion of Chinese culture or foreign students' need to understand Chinese culture. Therefore, the Culture Curriculum is not intended to be linguistics-oriented and concerned with dictionary definitions, syntax, phonology or grammar, nor is it designed to improve the students' knowledge about Chinese culture or history in the same way as the historical subject setting does in general education.
- (d) The aims of Chinese Culture Curriculum are planned to be a general guideline for teaching culture in TCFL, which is a so-called "Structural Curriculum" by Li (2004). The Structural Curriculum is a general guideline, while the "Manipulate Curriculum" explains the curriculum components according to different grades, courses, and subjects under the instruction of the Structural Curriculum (Li, 2004). The Chinese Culture Curriculum is expected to provide the principles for the teaching of Chinese culture in TCFL. Under the instruction of the Chinese Culture Curriculum, a decision about which cultural components are appropriate to be taught can be reachedIn addition, which parts of China's philosophy should be taught could be specified in a more detailed manner for

different courses and students at different levels. The Chinese Culture Curriculum should also serve as a benchmark for the compilation of culture-related textbooks and other teaching materials.

WHY A CULTURE CURRICULUM IS NEEDED

There are five facts that provide strong grounds for the development of a Chinese Culture Curriculum: (a) the lack of congruence between a large proportion of cultural subjects in teaching practice and the lack of theoretical guidelines; (b) the confusion that exists in current teaching and textbooks; (c) government motivation; (d) the appeal to the international domain; and (e) the rapid growth of overseas student numbers in recent years.

In practice, teaching Chinese culture accounts for a large proportion of the teaching. The current situation in the Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), the university with the highest enrolment and the best national and international reputation, is typical. The undergraduate courses offered by BLCU in 2004 for the four-year program of TCFL are located in two departments; the Department of Chinese Language and the Department of Chinese Language and Culture. In the Department of Chinese Language, the main focus is on language education. The subjects for Year 1 and Year 2 are mainly linguistic-oriented, and comprise primary, intermediary and advanced Chinese reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the third and fourth years, culture-related subjects increase greatly from 17 per cent to 56 per cent. In the Department of Chinese Language and Culture, the subjects are much more culture-oriented. All four compulsory courses in the third and fourth years are about Chinese culture, which include China's Humanistic Knowledge, Chinese Humanistic Geography, Chinese Cultural History, Discussion of Special Cultural Topics and the History of Chinese Philosophy (BLCU, 2003). In comparison, MIALS (Melbourne Institute of Asian Language and Societies) has two majors in 2003, a major in Chinese Language and a major in Chinese Studies. For the major in Chinese Language, which is essentially language-centred, about 13 per cent of the subjects are culture-oriented, and the major in Chinese Studies, about 72 per cent of the topics have a cultural component.

With regard to the substantial amount of Chinese culture in TCFL, a guideline that defines why Chinese culture should be taught, what to teach, how to teach it and how to decide if the goals have been met should be provided. However, the scheme does not appear to be in evidence at present. As a result, a number of ambiguities are presented in current teaching practice. Zhang (2004, p.53) has noted that there is an "unclear definition of culture and culture textbooks; confusions of culture teaching in TCFL; lack of consensus concerning the content and arrangement of a culture textbook". The textbooks currently used are mainly linguistics-oriented. There is no textbook that links cultural studies with language acquisition based upon a result-promised method. Without normative standards, some lecturers compile teaching materials according to their own ideas and experience rather than following a formulated curriculum. Li (2004, p.263) describes the inverted phenomenon as "textbooks leading curriculum". The setting of subjects in the university follows tradition rather than a grounded framework. The selection of contents has not yet been justified. Thus teaching cultural elements is at present mainly spontaneous and experience-oriented.

Research concerning the teaching of cultural elements has concerned the Chinese government since the 1990s. The projects related to teaching cultural elements in TCFL were listed as one of the key projects having priority in obtaining government funds in the Research Project Guideline (RPG) of 1998 – 2000. RPG is officially published every five years by NOCFL (National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language), a government organisation subsidiary to the Ministry of Education. It guides the research focus and direction of TCFL in the sense that it not only reveals the areas of greatest government concern but also the latest research topics that

require further commitment. Research projects related to teaching culture in TCFL have remained as one of the important government funding projects in the RPG up to the present.

The call for theoretical guidelines has also been raised in the international domain. Louie (1987), a lecturer at Murdoch University in Western Australia, suggested that the textbooks and courses developed in mainland China are lacking an aware of the cultural elements in language. The way that Chinese culture has been presented in some textbooks has changed recently and indicates that there is still the need for developing a curriculum that caters for the requirements of students from different cultural backgrounds.

The rapid growth of overseas student numbers reveals the need even more strongly. In 2004 overseas student numbers increased by 43 per cent compared with 2003. With the boom in China's economy in recent years, particularly the influence of Beijing's successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, Chinese language education appears to be in great demand. The expansion of language schools requires a teaching methodology that is systematic, normative, purposeful, theory-grounded, and standardised.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Lin (1996) suggested four principles that could apply to the selection of contents for the Culture Curriculum. First, the contents should be drawn from the common culture of the whole nation regardless of differences between individuals or particular ethnic groups. Second, the cultural elements should be contemporary and combine considerations of their origins and development. Third, the content should represent the mass culture rather than an elite culture. Fourth, the selection of cultural elements should be applicable to the students. Furthermore, he suggested four basic elements as part of the Culture Curriculum, namely, the values, psychological features, the life style, and customs of the Chinese people.

However, in Lin's comments, there are some issues that require examination and discussion. For instance, what is the common culture? Whose culture is it? Based upon which theory or previous research has he proposed the four principles for the selection of cultural elements? It would appear that he has suggested three categories of culture based upon a couple of language phenomena. The questions raised here are: how do such limited language examples justify this kind of classification, and do three cultural aspects provide appropriate coverage of the issues?

Lu (1990) suggested that the aim of TCFL it is not to promulgate Chinese culture. Overemphasising the individuality and superiority of Chinese culture would do nothing but antagonise foreign students. Hence, although some parts of Chinese culture may be the pride of the Chinese nation; if they are antiquated, it may not be significant to introduce them into TCFL. Accordingly, Lu questions the pigtailed portraits of people from the Qing Dynasty, which appear in textbooks. His idea is that selecting cultural elements should neither cater for foreigners' images of China nor celebrate the Chinese with cultural chauvinism.

In addition, Lu (1991) claimed that teaching cultural elements should match students' language competency. This was based upon the theoretical presumption that teaching culture was part of language education, and should assist students' to improve cross-cultural language competency. Hence culture is not considered to be an independent discipline; instead it is conceived of as subsidiary to Chinese language teaching. This has been questioned by some scholars who argued that cultural elements should be a separate concern, no matter whether or not it is directly related to language learning, since some of the influences on language learning were potentially embedded and thus might not emerge immediately, but might be beneficial in the future.

Most of the relevant studies have attempted to classify cultural elements with suggestions about the contents for the Chinese Culture Curriculum. First, culture was divided in terms of the function that it served in cross-cultural communication. Zhang (1990) proposed two concepts, 'social culture and 'knowledge culture'. Social culture refers to those effects that might have impacted directly on the understanding and usage of the target language. By 'directly', Zhang meant that the lack of social culture of the target language might have resulted in misunderstanding or distortion in conversation. Knowledge culture included cultural elements that might not have led to a deviation from the meaning or a failure of communication if the speakers lacked this type of cultural knowledge. In addition, Zhang pointed out that the method of finding social culture was to contrast the culture in the target language with that in the learners' mother language. The dissimilar parts were those that might have an influence on cross-cultural communication and therefore should have been introduced into teaching. The obvious limitation of Zhang's 'social culture' theory was the exclusion of non-verbal language, but Zhang (1992) extended the concept of 'social culture' by introducing non-verbal social cultural elements.

Similarly, Lu (1991) defined 'social culture' as the values, norms of correctness, custom, psychological features and thinking styles of a nation. It is considered to be connotative and is frequently used by native speakers unconsciously. He stressed a method that compared two different cultures which led to the development of the Contrasting Culture Theory (Lu, 1991). Moreover, Bian (1992) proposed two methods of comparison, vertical (historical) and horizontal (cross-cultural), to identify social cultural elements.

However, social culture was questioned by Zhao (1996) from the standpoint of taxonomy. Zhao stated that the classification of social culture and knowledge culture is not unconditional. For instance, some social cultural elements may have influenced the understanding for English speakers, but may not have been a problem for Japanese or Korean students, whose cultural background was closer to Chinese culture. In addition, some cultural elements may have been a problem for first year students, but not for advanced learners. That is to say, some parts of Chinese culture could have been social culture and could also be knowledge culture depending on the prevailing conditions. According to the principles of taxonomy, categories within one class should have been mutually exclusive (Kipnis, 1997). Otherwise the criterion based on this categorisation would have been questionable. The taxonomic principles applied equally to the classification of social culture and knowledge culture. If the denotation of social culture and knowledge culture were not exclusive, the criterion was accordingly problematic.

Second from the perspective of cognitive science, a few scholars such as Mei (1994) have proposed culture as 'Declarative Culture Knowledge' and 'Procedural Culture Knowledge'. Mei's starting point is the classification of the cognitive science of knowledge. According to cognitive research, knowledge could be divided into two categories, 'declarative knowledge' and 'procedural knowledge'. Consequently, Mei has suggested that there might be two distinct culture elements, declarative culture knowledge and procedural culture knowledge. Declarative culture knowledge is static and refers to the cultural elements embedded in the grammatical, semantic and pragmatic system and closely related to discourse. It generally includes the customs, psychological features, values, thinking patterns and aesthetic preferences of a nation. In contrast, procedural culture knowledge refers to a kind of cross-cultural capability that could be transferred from declarative culture knowledge. Thus, 'declarative culture knowledge' was taken by Mei as a foundation to develop 'procedural culture knowledge'.

Mei's theory is a good attempt to connect cultural research with cognitive science. However, there are two shortcomings in his theory. First, the capability to speak one kind of language and the knowledge about this kind of language are two concepts that belong to different paradigms. According to Mei's description, 'procedural culture knowledge' is a kind of capability transferred from 'declarative culture knowledge'. The question arising here is whether 'procedural culture knowledge' is in essence a type of knowledge or capability. Either the 'procedural culture

knowledge' should not be named as knowledge or the explanation of this concept needs to be modified. Second, how the classification of cognitive science could be divided logically into two categories of culture elements has not been explained in Mei's writing. Thus it merely remains an unsubstantiated hypothesis in his writing. Accordingly a classification that is based on an unproven assumption casts doubt on the validity of this kind of categorisation

To sum up, there are some items in the literature that focus on the discussion of the mission of teaching cultural elements in TCFL, and also on the content of the Culture Curriculum. However, there is no agreement with regard to the classification of cultural elements, and therefore, the parts of culture that should be introduced into Culture Curriculum remain uncertain.

CONTEMPORY TEACHING OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TCFL)

TCFL does not attract as much attention as TESOL, ESL or EAL in the English speaking world. However, there is some research and written evidence to be found in Australia and the United States at various educational levels that is worthy of consideration. In Australia, language teaching is influenced by the blueprint of the National Language Policy and 'Australia Language Levels' (ALL).

In Victoria and South Australia, the Greek Curriculum was adopted as a model curriculum for the Teaching of a Language Other Than English (LOTE). Based upon this, a communicative curriculum for teaching the Chinese language from Prep to Year 8 was once planned by a research team coordinated by Riley (1987). It was proposed as a curriculum that catered for the needs of Chinese and non-Chinese speaking pupils living and studying in Australia. The materials designed were closely related to pupils' daily activities at home and at school. This project accommodated students' needs in an Australian school context.

The awareness of the cultural background of LOTE students has also been addressed in the ALL program as it is stated that "curriculum developers need to ensure that the linguistic and cultural background which learners bring with them is recognised and valued in the curriculum materials, and, subsequently, in programming and teaching" (McKay and Scarino, 1991, p.40).

A systematic project of action research on Chinese curriculum planning for undergraduate courses was conducted at Griffith University in 1996. The curriculum was designed for business subjects and future needs. Accordingly the context that the curriculum was expected to serve was given priority over the others (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). This project exemplified the idea that curriculum planning should be conducted in a manner primarily associated with the analysis of the context to which it was to be applied.

In the United States, a number of publications related to the teaching of culture have been found. From a pedagogical point of view, Bonin (1982) and Campbell (1967) examined the situation of teaching culture at the elementary and secondary school levels. Levy (1978) Dien (1985), Liu (1992), Myers (2000), Shen (2003), Teng (2001), Zeng (2004) made efforts to bridge the gap between teaching Chinese and teaching Chinese culture by adopting multimedia instructional instruments such as video programs, that explained the meaning of culture and connected cultural elements with linguistic education. Three important articles were presented by Bi (1987), Botman (1982) and Tsu (1977). Bi (1987) argued for the role of cultural orientation in the teaching of Chinese. Botman (1982) highlighted the position of creating a cultural context for beginning language students in Romania, while Tsu (1977) proposed the concepts of bilingual and bicultural education in Asia. Marney (1977), Roy (1980), Sung (1981), Williams (1990), Munro (1983) and Hammond (1992) approached this topic from various cultural standpoints. The topics involved comparing the Chinese way of thinking and the individualism of the West to the collectivism of China, cultural chauvinism and the confusion that was aroused by different metaphors of cultural

elements. However, the methodology of the teaching Chinese as a foreign language was rarely to be found under discussion.

DISCUSSION

The historical review raises three concerns. First, most current writings, particularly in mainland China, focus on finding out what should be taught instead of clarifying why it should be taught, for instance Zhang and Mei's discussion of social culture and declarative culture. The debate on social culture could not reach agreement because there is a lack of justification for the taxonomy. Lin's proposal (1996) that the values, psychological features, and the life style and customs of the Chinese people should be introduced into classroom falls into this trap once again. Without a widely accepted criterion, the classification of a culture that is complex and boundless seems not only impossible but also not feasible. The answers of why culture should be taught in foreign language classes, namely the objectives of teaching are suggested as the criteria for the selection of culture.

Tyler (1949, p.3) appreciated objectives as a starting point in curriculum planning so that "these educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed and tests and examinations are prepared." Taba (1962) also argued for the priority of setting the objectives so that they serve as a measure to set the scope and limit for enormous knowledge created by human beings, thus making teaching possible. Kelly (2004, p.50) has given an even more explicit explanation:

a notion of the culture of the society, no matter how acceptable in definition or content, will not in itself provide us with appropriate criteria of selection. We will need to look elsewhere for justification of the selection we do make, so that the arguments for a curriculum content based on the culture or cultures of society will not in themselves take us very far towards finding a solution to our problem.

Kelly's statement has pointed out that what is missing in the literature is that the selection of content for teaching lacks criteria. Based upon the foregoing section, this study suggests that the focus of the current research of the Chinese Culture Curriculum needs to switch from the selection of content to the exploration of the objectives of the Chinese Culture Curriculum that can be used as the criteria for the classification of content and encompass the entire range of planning.

Second, this study also calls for further research to distinguish the sources from which the objectives may be suggested and the forces that may influence the objectives. Tyler (1949) has suggested three source, students' needs, social life and subject specialists, and two forces, philosophy and psychology of learning, which have been elaborated, applied and expanded (Armstrong, 2003; Brady, 1981; Clark, 1972; Clark, 1989; Eisner, 1969; Husén, 1994; Kelly, 2004; Lawton, 1973, 1975; Mager, 1961; Popham, 1969; Print, 1987; Skilbeck, 1991; Taba, 1962; Tanner and Tanner, 1980; Walker, 1999; Wheeler, 1967).

With regard to the planning of a Chinese Culture Curriculum, those sources and forces need to be explored and specified. For instance, what are the students' ethnographic features, what are their needs, what are the values of Chinese society, how is the social life incorporated into the Culture Curriculum. In other words, the Chinese Culture Curriculum planning should take into account three aspects that have been suggested in the foregoing section, (a) the needs and characteristics of the student, (b) the nature of culture and (c) the context where the curriculum is to be applied.

Third, further research is needed to clarify the aims, objectives and goals of the Chinese Culture Curriculum. Lu (1990) has raised the question that the objectives of teaching Chinese culture are to cater for foreigners' preferences or to be culturally chauvinistic. Without an explicit answer to this question, the objectives and goals that stem from these aims and objectives cannot be

reasonably developed. According to Husén (1994) and Wheeler (1967), the aim of an educational program refers to the general principle of teaching. Regarding the planning of the Culture Curriculum, the two presumed aims, to improve students' cross-cultural communicative competency and to disseminate the Chinese culture tradition widely around the world, invite verification. Further research is required to find out the forms in which the objectives may be used in the Chinese Culture Curriculum. The objectives that stem from the aims could exist in the form of behavioural objectives (Stenhouse, 1970) and instructional objectives or expressive objectives (Eisner, 1969). Attention is drawn to the premise of Stenhouse and Eisner's statement that the ultimate aim of general education is to change the receiver's behaviour. In terms of the Chinese Culture Curriculum, the aims vary, and thus further discussion is invited in order to explore the possible forms that the objectives of the Chinese Culture Curriculum should take.

Fourth, any steps in curriculum planning are not isolated processes, but parts of an interactive and integrated system. Curriculum planning is a cyclical process in which each step should respond to the continuing or previous steps. Therefore, an element of one curriculum should not be examined in an isolated manner, but in a system interacting with other curriculum components (Kelly, 2004). Discussion of the content selection for the Culture Curriculum planning should fit with the overall mission of TCFL as well as other curriculum elements. This is the way to make the contents attainable and pertinent to practitioners.

Finally, recent research has mainly examined the selection of cultural elements from the perspective of socio-linguistics, cognitive science and taxonomy (Bian, 1992; Lu, 1991; Mei, 1994; Zhang, 1990; Zhang, 1992). Curriculum planning theory has not been used in current research. This study calls for the practice and exploration that introduces and incorporates curriculum planning theory into research on the Chinese Culture Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to raise the awareness of the need for planning the Culture Curriculum as a blueprint to guide the practice of teaching. It also highlights the necessity of introducing curriculum theory into Chinese Culture Curriculum planning. Further research has been invited to identify the forms and sources of objectives, and the forces that may influence the planning of the Chinese Culture Curriculum.

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